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Trapped in the "Shadow-Space": Woman's Struggle to Become Round in George Eliot's Middlemarch

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In Book IV of *Middlemarch,* George Eliot writes a scene in which Mr. Brooke, a wealthy bachelor landowner, visits one of his tenants to discuss "the small delinquent who had been caught with the leveret" (271). Dagley, the tenant, makes it clear to Brooke that he will not reprimand his son for any crime if it were to please even "twenty landlords istid o' one, and that a bad un," and begins to turn what Brooke had hoped to be a "friendly" discussion into quite a spectacle (273). Dagley's angry reaction to Brooke's supposed authority attracts the attention of passing laborers and Brooke thinks it "wiser to be quite passive than to attempt a ridiculous flight pursued by a bawling man" (274). While bravely awaiting an opportunity to escape the "mossy thatch of the cow-shed, the broken grey barn-doors, [and] the pauper labourers in ragged breeches" (272), Dagley, in standing his own ground, threatens Brooke with the rumors of "the Rinform": "'Ay, ay,' says I. 'He's a man for the Rinform,' says they. That's what they says. An' I made out what the Rinform were—an' it were to send you an' your likes a-scuttlin'; an' wi' pretty strong-smellin' things too" (274). This idea of "rinform" remains interwoven through the historical context of the novel, seen mainly through the ideas and desires of Dorothea Brooke, the landowner's niece. Wishing to improve the conditions of Middlemarch's tenant farmers, she seeks multiple times to expand the narrow minds of her uncle and the likewise products of society, in a similar way that Dagley threatens Brooke with the word "rinform." The difference between Dorothea and her uncle is that though they might only be able to understand and empathize with the miserable conditions in which tenant farmers live to a certain degree, Dorothea *tries*, and lives to try to improve their conditions, even if the only thing she can do

independently is *desire* that their conditions improve: "That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil—widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower" (270). Dorothea must struggle to somehow "round out" the peasants in her plea to reform, to raise them up from their minor status and give them some sort of definition or shape. "Reform" then becomes shorthand for struggle—the struggle between the individual and society—a fight which Dorothea will continue to wage throughout the entirety of the novel.

What is made clear in this scene is that Brooke and Dagley come from two different lifestyles, two different economies, two different speech types, and the use this highly-stratified language serves to show just how different these men are. This kind of socially stratified language is the centerpiece of Mikhail Bakhtin's book *The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), in which he suggests that "the novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types…and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions" (Bakhtin 674). Dagley, who represents Bakhtin's illiterate peasant, infuses the language of his peasantry with the language of politics, and thus is living in "several language systems,…pass[ing] from one to the other without thinking, automatically" (Bakhtin 677). Passing from system to system in a single statement, Dagley uses this political language to satisfy his own ends—to scare Brooke off his own property. Bakhtin goes on to say that the various vessels of communication within the novel—narrators, authorial speech, character voice, and genre—all serve to incorporate "heteroglossia" into the novel; it is "these distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech

types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization," that make up the stylistics of the novel (Bakhtin 674).

Language stratifies itself into speech types, across differing genders, races, ages, and social statuses. And this stratification can be intentionally manipulated: "What is more, all socially significant world views have the capacity to exploit the intentional possibilities of language through the medium of their specific concrete instancing" (Bakhtin 675). Language is powerful, and the manipulation of language lends an incredible amount of power to the beholder (in this case, an author). And yet language is common. What has once been said has most likely been said before. Bakhtin makes this point, stating that language is over-populated with others' intentions. This idea of language being populated, or over-populated, with others' uses and intentions and thoughts and manipulations seems discouraging: he states that "expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process" (Bakhtin 677). If it is so difficult, Eliot leaves no hint of it in *Middlemarch*, where she compels words "to serve a second master." She is able to manipulate this use of stratified language to portray the "struggle with language" that we are all a part of; that is to say, one might ask one's self, "How can I define my individuality and originality—or roundness—through this over-populated language?" Brooke runs into this problem with Dagley, when he is cornered into an "other-language" world and finds himself outnumbered by peasants. One might suggest attempting to strip language clean at the outset of writing a novel; even if it were possible, for Bakhtin seems to think that even commanding language is a difficult process, it would be counter-productive to Eliot's ultimate end. By manipulating these stratified, over-populated languages, Eliot thereby gives her characters personalities and movement.

Through this manipulative delivery, we begin to make out where characters fall within the "narrative web," as Alex Woloch puts it in his book *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. According to Woloch, at the center of the novel lies the text`s symbolic structure, carefully and deliberately put together through the author's language. Surrounding that structure, keeping it together and strong, are the novel's minor characters. He goes on to state that "the novel gets infused with an awareness of its potential to *shift* the narrative focus away from an established center, toward minor characters" (Woloch 8). When considered in the light of Bakhtin's discussion of the manipulation of language and focus, this shifting about becomes something not only incredibly important, as has been suggested, but delicate—we see that it is a *process*. This shift in attention is particularly interesting when looking at the role of the minor character in the novel, who "comes to command a peculiar kind of attention in the partial occlusion of his fullness but who is always drowned out within the totality of the narrative; and what we remember about the character is never detached from how the text, for the most part, makes us forget him" (Woloch 29). Woloch explores how the *text*, as a force, distracts our attention from the minor character because she only lives in the "shadow-space between narrative position and human personality" (Woloch 29). It is her half-existence as a person, half-existence as a foil or symbol that simultaneously renders her significant and disposable. I will argue that there is a particular group of characters within Eliot's *Middlemarch* that fall into this "shadow-space" more so than any other characters: Eliot's females continuously appear less-rounded and inferior within their societal construct, which makes Dorothea Brooke's central role in the novel so interesting. By applying the theories of Bakhtinian voice and Woloch's stress on the importance of minor characters, I will read a set of

three female characters (Celia, Rosamond, and Dorothea) in order to examine how the construction of femininity is often a struggle to not become minor because of the supplementary role women are expected to play in society.

While Dorothea Brooke is thought to be the central character of the novel, it is only through her interactions with the female minor characters that she becomes so. On the very first page of the novel, the narrator characterizes Dorothea in relation to her sister: "usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that her sister Celia had more common-sense" (Eliot 1). Why point this out at this very early stage in the story, if not to foreshadow that Dorothea's lack of common sense in comparison to her sister will somehow come into play, fortunately or unfortunately, in the course of the novel? She is clever, we are told, but seems at a disadvantage compared with Celia, solely because she does not fit the feminine-mold society expects her to. And we see as the story progresses that Celia becomes a mother to her sister, and is constantly scolding her on her thoughts about men. Older and well-read, Dorothea oversees Tipton Grange with a strict religious morality:

> The rural opinion about the new young ladies, even among the cottagers, was generally in favour of Celia, as being so amiable and innocent-looking, while Miss Brooke's large eyes seemed, like her religion, too unusual and striking. Poor Dorothea! compared with her, the innocent-looking Celia was knowing and worldly-wise. (Eliot 3)

Eliot's repeated references to eyes, hair, and skin throughout her novels suggest that they signal or express character, a topic that Kent Puckett discusses in his book *Bad Form: Social Mistakes and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*. Dorothea and Maggie Tulliver (*Mill on the Floss*) are both characters with big, brown eyes that are unusual and distasteful in public opinion. Maggie's dark

skin, eyes, and hair make her an object of contempt to her mother, and later serve to label her as a temptress. Of course, the reader sees that Maggie's unusual physical appearance makes her unique and more beautiful than the typical woman in the novel, though the negative reception she receives from her community continues to plague her name up to the moment she drowns. Dorothea's unusual looks are rather different; she is a plain woman, though her plain dress is what throws her plain looks into relief and makes her beautiful. She is austere, and this shows in her posture, facial expression, and manners. She holds herself to a high moral and religious standard. Maggie is wild; she rejects these sorts of rules and lives at one with nature and cares more for her brother than God.

Celia, too, is less strict than Dorothea but not so wild as Maggie Tulliver, and perhaps this is where her common-sense really shows; Celia's life seems safe, married to a strictly moral man who watches over his wife, their finances, and his in-laws, though his intimate feelings toward Dorothea complicate the latter. Celia is patient and observant, never impulsive, and "what she had to say could wait, and came from her always with the same quiet staccato evenness" (20). She has children whom she is quite fond of, a deep attachment to her family, and a voice that seems to scold gently and convincingly. The narrator tells us at the end of the first chapter, "Since they could remember, there had been a mixture of criticism and awe in the attitude of Celia's mind towards her sister" (7). This comes after a very intense scene during which Celia exposes her more sensible attitude towards heirlooms—their mother's jewelry—and during which Dorothea exposes her very haughty, very strict feelings toward the idea of *any* flashy ornamentation, even if they are her mother's jewels left to the daughters to wear. The upper hand switches back and forth between sisters until this last paragraph, in which Celia has

clearly won and Dorothea feels the need to apologize silently to her younger sister. And though the narrator tells us of this relationship, there really is little need to do so, for Celia is at times very direct in telling her sister about herself:

> I thought it right to tell you, because you went on as you always do, never looking just where you are, and treading in the wrong place. You always see what nobody else sees; it is impossible to satisfy you; yet you never see what is quite plain. That's your way, Dodo. (23)

In this scene and several others, Celia is attempting to flatten Dorothea`s character by putting her into a minority, by crushing her spirit and confining her to seeing "what everyone else sees." Dorothea is less liked by society *because* she does not conform to the cookie-cutter woman mold, and this distinction between society's standards and the way in which Eliot wants us to perceive Dorothea is made clear: we come out of this moment feeling bad for Dorothea and feeling annoyed at Celia. And from this point forward, Celia remains a "thorn in [Dorothea's] spirit" (23). Her role in the novel has clearly been defined; she will continue to be the challenger to Dorothea's goals, ideals, and life. She becomes the voice of society that judges and criticizes, though Eliot ultimately keeps her at a safe enough distance so that her character does not become repugnant to us. Just here, in this statement, Celia becomes a half-existence—a thorn, if you will—only present on the page in relation to her sister. And yet, this half-existence is necessary to Dorothea. It is only when Celia becomes flat that Dorothea can become round.

Dorothea's moral complexities serve to separate her from not only her sister, but from the rest of society. She is the template of truth and ethics against which all other characters are

measured, and her relationships with other women, particularly Rosamond Vincy, define the feminine style of Middlemarch. Rosamond is drawn onto the page as a half-existence from the beginning, being introduced only in relation to Dorothea:

> Lydgate, in fact, was already conscious of being fascinated by a woman strikingly different from Miss Brooke: he did not in the least suppose that he had lost his balance and fallen in love, but he had said of that particular woman, "She is grace herself; she is perfectly lovely and accomplished. That is what a woman ought to be: she ought to produce the effect of exquisite music." Plain women he regarded as he did the other severe facts of life, to be faced with philosophy and investigated by science. (64)

According to Lydgate, a woman's desirability depends solely on her ability to produce exquisite music, to charm a man with her bodily appearance. Dorothea, plain in style and therefore not clearly desirable, should rather be approached with scientific thought than with romantic thought. We are satisfied with this passage, however, because it radiates the shallow narcissism of femininity, and we know that Dorothea will rise above this and never suffer from the backlash of a mirror. Rosamond, on the other hand, must "suffer at the altar of style," remaining a half-existence throughout the novel while Dorothea's character only rounds out (Puckett 96). As notes, Rosamond's "narcissistic self-identity prevents her from meaning anything in particular to anyone else" but her mirror, for her relationship with Lydgate quickly crumbles due to her inability to understand him and his inability to understand her (97). He cannot be satisfied by a half-existence, by a reflection of the feminine ideal, and thus Rosamond becomes "the lovely ghost of herself" in the presence of Miss Brooke.

It is interesting, however, to read how Rosamond changes by the close of the novel, after being compared time after time to the simple, virtuous characters of Dorothea and Mary Garth: Rosamond seems to have developed more fully, to have grown into a more comfortable and mature relationship with Lydgate. Throughout the narrator's relentless description of Rosamond's character, as Puckett rightly points out, the word "infantine" crops up multiple times: three in direct relation to the fair blondness of her hair, one to her "rounded…mouth and cheek," and one to the childish notion of wealth and security (Eliot 547). Questioning this use of "infantine," Puckett suggests that "the term manages nicely the relation between innocence and aggression that characterizes Rosamond and primary narcissism both," and that it captures Rosamond's natural and "innocent" desire to be the center of attention in all company, especially among men (100).

I would go further, and suggest that not only does it do well to identify why her character is so unlikeable, but that it foreshadows the development of her character throughout the rest of the novel. When we meet her and for most of the novel thereafter, Rosamond is infantine in looks and thought, and her interactions with the more rounded character of Dorothea serve to move her development along. We see this most in Book VIII, in which we hear Rosamond described as "infantine" for the last time, during which Dorothea and Rosamond face each other quite awkwardly and uneasily for the last time. In this scene, which takes place in Lowick Gate, Rosamond's infantine aggressiveness begins to break down almost immediately: "Dorothea's face had become animated, and as it beamed on Rosamond very close to her, she felt something like bashful timidity before a superior, in the presence of this self-forgetful ardour" (548). Already Rosamond begins to feel shame, recognizing her inferiority to Dorothea.

And, as the scene unfolds and Dorothea continues to speak, Rosamond comes to her big break: "It was a newer crisis in Rosamond's experience than even Dorothea could imagine: she was under the first great shock that had shattered her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others" (549). It takes Dorothea, her superior, to relay the truths of Rosamond's marriage and the feelings of her husband, and Rosamond takes this fully to heart. She is starting to self-reflect, to conscientiously criticize—something that we have not known her to be capable of until now. Life as she knew it has been shattered; she no longer "control[s]…the world through a combination of hallucination and artifice" (Puckett 101).

And, finally, we see Rosamond step completely out of the mirror her half-existence has been trapped in, and, "taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own—hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined aspect…involuntarily put her lips to Dorothea's forehead" (Eliot 550). It is the direct influence of Dorothea and the uninhibited and honest nature of her character that force Rosamond first actually to scrutinize what she sees reflected in the mirror rather than simply admire it, and then to break her self-reflected gaze and empathize *for the first time* in what we can assume to be her entire life.

No longer do we view Rosamond as infantine; the final mention of this word appears in relation to Arthur Chettam, an actual child in a normal physically and mentally infantine state (560). Our last glimpse of Rosamond Vincy comes in the "Finale," when we learn that she "never committed a second compromising indiscretion" but "simply continued to be mild in her temper…never utter[ing] a word in depreciation of Dorothea, keeping in religious remembrance the generosity which had come to her aid in the sharpest crisis of her life" (575). Though Rosamond has *developed* beyond her "infantine" state and become the patient wife and doting

mother that somewhat resemble the lives of Mary Vincy and Celia Chettam—still charming and beautiful, but more composed and humble—the last time we see her name printed on the page, it is in direct relation to Dorothea. She is clearly a fuller character by the end of the novel than she was at the beginning, but to what avail? She remains as Dorothea's shadow, her mere counterpart.

If Celia and Rosamond both remain half-existences in the novel, and yet have undergone some sort of development, what of our Mother Theresa, our heroine? Dorothea's ending is, as Eliot remarks, controversial: "Sir James never ceased to regard Dorothea's second marriage as a mistake; and indeed this remained the tradition concerning it in Middlemarch…Those who had not seen anything of Dorothea usually observed that she could not have been a 'nice woman,' else she would not have married either the one or the other" (577). In a town where "people talk most of all about what others talk about" (Bakhtin 681), Dorothea's story becomes engrained as a social mishap, a bad mark on the otherwise perfectly clean record of Middlemarch's history (though we full well know that Middlemarch's record is far from perfect or clean). And among those who knew her better, it was thought "a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother" (Eliot 576). And yet, no one is able to offer a more fulfilling solution, a happier ending for our heroine. It seems here that she must be, at the end of it all, the only thing society can allow her to be; like her sister, like Rosamond, she must eventually be the wife and mother, existing only through the lives around her. But do we really accept that Dorothea remains a mere half-existence to her *husband*?

When Will and Dorothea first appear on the page together, Will immediately draws poor conclusions regarding his cousin: "Ladislaw had made up his mind that she must be an unpleasant girl, since she was going to marry Casaubon…But what a voice! It was like the voice of a soul that had once lived in an Aeolian harp" (53). In this one scene, Will has managed to flatten Dorothea's character in two ways: first, by assuming that her character must be strikingly similar to Casaubon's and therefore unpleasant; and second, by taking her character out of the real or human context and placing it within a harp. Will continues to hold Dorothea high up on a pedestal, "an angel beguiled" (145). Her ethereal beauty constantly threatens to flatten her character, such as when Will and his German acquaintance see her next to the figure of Madonna at the Vatican in Rome. In this particular instance, as Will is struggling with his first impressions of his fair cousin, he actually defends her existence: "Yes, and that your painting her was the chief outcome of her existence—the divinity passing into higher completeness and all but exhausted in the act of covering your bit of canvas" (132). It seems here as if Will outright disagrees with the one-dimensional portrait of Mrs. Casaubon, and yet only two chapters later he recalls the image of the Aeolian harp, removing her from the human existence and etherealizing her once again. This continues throughout the course of the novel, demonstrating the seemingly undefinable-ness of Dorothea's character, perhaps because she is caught between two worlds: society so wants her to "flatten out," as it were, and we want her to "round out." The tug and pull, the constant return to the Aeolian harp, suggests the difficulty of seeing any woman as perfectly round in such a society, the difficulty even among those characters whom we attribute with more common sense (or hope thereof), like we might Will Ladislaw.

Just before the novel comes to its finale, we get a scene during which Mr. Brooke comes to find a small group of Middlemarch society on the lawn at Freshitt Hall, and decides to take the moment to break the news of the engagement between Will and Dorothea. Eliot begins this section with, "It was just after the Lords had thrown out the Reform Bill," suggesting some finality to the development of the story—or to the development of Dorothea (560). As Brooke is about to break his horrible news, and the crowd is waiting in eager anticipation, he says, "There's something singular in things: they come round, you know" (562). This statement, appearing a mere ten pages before the finale, once again silmultaneously contradicts Dorothea's development, just as Will's constant return to the Aeolian harp does: there is something "singular," or flat, about Dorothea's engagement, and yet something "round." Which are we to believe? The final scene between Dorothea and Celia seems to suggest that Dorothea's marriage and removal from Middlemarch will threaten the absolute deflation of Celia's character: "Well, it is very serious, Dodo…you will go away among queer people. And I shall never see you—and you won't mind about little Arthur—and I thought you always would" (566). The definition that Dorothea's roundness gave to Celia's otherwise completely flat character would be completely stripped away if Dorothea was no longer next to her—it is this physical proximity, as we have seen throughout the course of the novel, that matters most. Removed from society, from Celia and Rosamond, left without their presence to, in turn, make her appear more round, can Dorothea remain that way? As Celia struggles to understand what could pull her sister away from her, she implores Dorothea to tell her her story, the story of Will Ladislaw and Dorothea Brooke. Dorothea refuses, stating that, "No, dear, you would have to feel with me, else you would never know" (567). And that is the heart of it. No one in the novel, except for Will, has understood

Dorothea, her motives, her desires, her thoughts. How can they expect her to be a fully round person, when they do not understand her? It is impossible.

Thus, she becomes a wife and mother, but the wife and mother that we hope Dorothea can put *new* definition to, because everyone does battle with this struggle with or against language, and Dorothea has done so more than any other character. Her ending does not seem fit to society, even amongst those who wish the best for her, because they cannot help but believe that "wife and mother" is not enough for her. That is the connotation the language carries. Dorothea may change that (or, at least we hope she might, for therein lies any final note of hope in the story). Divided from those flat characters that make her appear round, we know not what is next for Dorothea, for her existence up to this point has suggested that she *needs* those inferior people in her life. She needs "rinform." And this is the note Eliot ends with, when she brings us back to Dorothea's soul one last time: "The effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs" (578). Though Dorothea must live a "hidden life" and forever be shunned or forgotten by society ("unvisited tomb"), her sacrifice lives on for us. Bringing us out of Middlemarch, and perhaps out of the page, Eliot suggests that Dorothea's character was so full, that it yet defines us and our characters, long after the novel closes.

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